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ABSTRACT

The Scottish Wider Access Program (SWAP) was designed to encourage adults to participate in higher education. Students enrolled in SWAP in 1991-92 and former SWAP students in their first year of higher education in 1991-92 were interviewed twice by telephone, near the beginning and toward the end of their SWAP course or first year. (The number of current SWAP students initially interviewed was 153, reduced through attrition to 131 for the follow-up interview; for the former SWAP students, numbers were 99 initially, reduced to 76 at the follow-up). A majority of both groups felt satisfied with their preparation for higher education. SWAP modules gave confidence by taking a step-by-step approach, but students worried that knowledge was fragmented and some modules were too easy. Continuous assessment helped students learn and built confidence. Over two-thirds saw SWAP methods as good preparation for higher education. Students praised tutors as knowledgeable, patient, and enthusiastic and welcomed study skills courses at the beginning of their programs. Over 40 percent of students cited financial problems and competing demands on time. Over 43 percent of the higher education sample experienced difficulties in understanding the subject. Students were more likely to seek help with academic problems and "admissible" personal problems. Personal problems were more likely than financial problems to affect students' work adversely. Students who failed to complete SWAP courses reported a range and variety of problems in making the transition to higher education. Most students were attracted to SWAP by the offer of a guaranteed place in higher education. (Two appendixes describe the sample.) (YLB)

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Students' Perceptions of Access Courses

A survey

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Margaret Johnstone
Kevin Lowden

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The Scottish Council for Research in Education

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Preface

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) is designed to encourage adults to participate in higher education. It is a unique programme involving almost all Scotland's institutions of further and higher education. They, together with regional authorities who provide bursaries for students attending full-time access courses, formed four consortia which in 1991 were rationalised into three. SWAP was launched in 1988 and student enrolments on access courses have risen from 750 in 1989 to almost 2,000 in 1992.

Under the aegis of SWAP, access courses have been developed which, if successfully completed, provide an entry route to higher education. The first access courses had a vocational thrust and were offered chiefly in the areas of science and technology. As the programme has developed a wider range of courses in arts, humanities and the social sciences has been offered.

Access courses typically are modular, use continuous assessment and are criterion referenced. In these respects they differ from traditional entry routes to higher education where examinations such as Highers and A levels are not modular and use end of year, norm-referenced assessments. Student experiences and perceptions of access courses and, in particular, their effectiveness as preparation for entry to higher education are therefore, of interest. It is these experiences and perceptions which form the basis of this report.

The report concentrates on surveys of access students on courses in 1991-92 and of former access students in their first year of higher education in 1991-92. Students were interviewed twice by telephone, near the beginning and towards the end of their access course or their first year in higher education. The surveys were developed from a separate, longer term qualitative study of access students funded by the Leverhulme Trust. That study is still in progress and so the findings reported here will be complemented by the 'Leverhulme' research findings at a later date.

The general picture provided by the surveys is a positive one. Most students see access courses as a good preparation for higher education. Inevitably, as with any innovation there are worries and concerns and these are reported in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapters 1 and 2 provide contextual information about SWAP and about the research approach, while the final Chapter considers the process of transition and, in particular, reports the views of a small sample of discontinuing students. For ease of reference a summary is provided at the beginning of the report, highlighting the key findings.

Acknowledgements

The surveys were undertaken as part of SCRE's contractual research for the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED). The research would not have been possible without the active co-operation of SOED Statistics Division, who organised liaison with further and higher education institutions. Access co-ordinators within the institutions distributed contact forms and encouraged students to participate in the surveys. They also helped to track discontinuing students but this proved a very difficult task and our experience here is mirrored by other researchers. We are especially grateful to the students who took part in two interviews at different stages in their courses.

Deborah Pegg of SOED Statistics Division patiently answered our questions and supplied us with the figures on national participation in SWAP courses which form the basis of Chapter 1.

Within SCRE several people helped with the work. Murray McVicar carried out a study of students who dropped out of access courses, which is reported in Chapter 5; Graham Thorpe and his team helped with data analysis and Janette Finlay typed successive drafts of the report in her usual efficient and good humoured manner. Responsibility for the content rests with the authors. The report does not necessarily represent the views of either SOED or SCRE.

Summary

This summary follows the structure of the report, beginning with a general view of the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) before focusing on specific findings from surveys of SWAP students. Research details are contained in Chapter Two and in the Technical Appendices. These provide important information against which to interpret findings. In particular, it should be noted that the sample of students was self-selected and so cannot be seen as representative.

The national picture

Theme	*Findings*	*Location in report (chapters)*
Growth in student numbers and of courses under SWAP	There were almost 1,600 students on access courses in 1991-92 compared to 750 in 1989-90. From an initial emphasis on science and technology courses, SWAP has promoted growth in business studies, health care, social science and other courses.	*1*
Almost half SWAP students are over thirty	SWAP targets students aged 21 or over. It has been successful in attracting older adults.	*1*
Most SWAP students have some educational qualifications	Fewer than one in five students had no qualifications. Most had some 'O' grades or equivalent. Almost half had no qualifications in English and maths.	*1*
Women are well represented	Over half of SWAP students are female.	*1*
Over one in three SWAP students had been unemployed	The majority of SWAP students had been in employment directly prior to entry. Few students had firm career plans after access and HE.	*1, 5*
Those from economically and socially deprived areas are represented	It is difficult to obtain an accurate measure of social and economic disadvantage. However, over 40% of SWAP students in 1991-92 came from areas designated as 'deprived'.	*1*
Few students from ethnic minorities or with physical disability	About 2% of SWAP students are reported as having a physical disability. There are no official figures for ethnic minorities but research has indicated that about 1% of SWAP students in the west of Scotland are of Asian, African or West Indian origin.	*1*

The National picture (cont)

Theme	*Findings*	*Location in report (chapters)*
Course completion and progression rates are encouraging	About 71% of students successfully completed their access course. Of these 67% progressed to HE in 1991-92.	*1*

Preparation for HE

Students felt well prepared for HE	Both students on access courses (83%) and former access students completing their first year of HE (85%) felt satisfied with their preparation for HE.	*3*
Students became progressively more critical of modules	Modules gave students confidence by taking a step by step approach but there were worries about too great a fragmentation of knowledge and about some modules being too easy.	*3*
Continuous assessment was generally appreciated	Continuous assessment helped students learn and built confidence. However, students on exam based HE courses worried about their lack of exam practice. By the end of their first year in HE, SWAP students were more positive about continuous assessment.	*3*
Variety in teaching methods was appreciated. Mis-match between access and HE courses was not a worry	Over two-thirds of HE students saw access methods as good preparation for HE. Some students would have welcomed more independent study on access courses.	*3*
Tutors were seen positively	Students praised both access and HE tutors as knowledgeable, patient and enthusiastic.	*3*
Study skills	Students welcomed study skills courses at the beginning of their programmes but grew more critical.	*3*

Problems

Key problems for students were money and time	Over 40% of students cited financial problems. They also highlighted the difficulties of studying when there were competing demands, of family and others, on time.	*4*
Academic problems	Over 43% of the HE sample had experienced difficulties in understanding the subject.	*4*

Problems (cont)

Theme	Findings	Location in report (chapters)
Help with problems	Students were more likely to seek help with academic problems, and 'admissible' personal problems such as those of childcare or illness than for financial or other personal problems.	4
Work affected by personal problems	Personal problems were more likely adversely to affect students' work than financial problems.	4
Knowledge of student guidance services	Students were much more knowledgeable about services in access courses than in HE. They were largely ignorant about the existence of a careers service in HE.	4

Transition to HE

Discontinuing students	Students who failed to complete acccess courses reported a range and variety of problems. No single pattern emerged.	5
A guaranteed place	Most students were attracted to SWAP by the offer of a guaranteed place in HE.	5
Conditions of entry to HE	A few HE institutions stipulated conditions for entry beyond the successful completion of access courses. Some students resented this.	5
Degree level studies favoured	Most students wanted to study degree level courses. Few progressed to HND or HNC courses.	5

1 The national picture

Adult education has become a prominent political issue over the last decade. Projected demographic trends have indicated a decline in the number of 16-18 year olds in the population over the next fifteen years. At a time when the need for a skilled and flexible workforce has been seen as important for a competitive economy, the implications of fewer younger people being available for the labour market and higher education has caused concern. Recurrent education and training, with an emphasis on increasing participation by adults, has been identified as one way of offsetting the effects predicted by the decline in the youth cohort. Consequently, the nature of education and training provision has been questioned. One issue to emerge from this debate has been the appropriateness of a higher education system which is mainly geared to full-time provision for young people entering straight from school with Highers or A Levels. The 1987 White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the challenge*, encouraged universities and other higher education institutions to look at their provision with the aim of attracting more adults to participate. The theme of increased access to higher education has since become a major issue in more recent White Papers and for the education world in general.

Higher education institutions have responded to the call for wider access in a number of ways. For example, different modes of provision, such as part-time or evening courses, have begun to increase. Such courses encourage the participation of adults who would not otherwise be able to attend, due to work or family responsibilities. Credit accumulation and transfer schemes are being introduced. These allow students to build up evidence of their attainments over time and so to progress into more advanced courses, or to ease transfer from one institution to another. These developments aim to encourage participation in higher education by those holding appropriate entry qualifications. Access courses, on the other hand, aim to encourage participation in higher education by adults holding no, or insufficient, entry qualifications. Originally these were developed by universities, using their continuing education departments, to allow adults without formal entry qualifications to undertake a course of study which, if successfully completed, would allow the student to enter a degree course at that university. Until very recently, most of these courses were aimed at widening access to non-science subjects, such as the humanities, social sciences and the arts. However, in Scotland a radical and innovative approach to access has been developed involving all higher education institutions, further education institutions and Regional Authorities. This is known as the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP).

Origins and outline of SWAP

SWAP was set up by the Secretary of State for Scotland in April 1988, with funding from the SOED and the Training Agency. The aims of SWAP are:

- to improve the rate of participation in higher education by older students and those lacking the traditional qualifications

- to target traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (eg those from semi- and unskilled occupations, ethnic minorities)
- to encourage collaboration between institutions of further and higher education so that effective progression from further to higher education would be easier.

The institutions and Regional Authorities involved in SWAP formed themselves originally into four consortia. There are now three consortia, North of Scotland, South-East Scotland and West of Scotland (East and Mid Scotland consortia were amalgamated in 1990 to form the South East Scotland consortium). The lead agency for each consortium is a Regional Council. The members of the consortia are drawn from higher and further education institutions and from the Regional Authorities in the geographic area covered. The current levels of funding by the SOED for the Programme is £500,000, with a similar amount, largely in terms of resources, being provided by the three consortia. The most recent figures show that there are approximately 1600 students involved in SWAP courses with almost all Scottish further and higher education institutions participating. Table 1.1 gives details of the numbers of students participating in courses in each consortium over the past three years.

Table 1.1: Numbers of students in each SWAP consortium

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
West	554	*74*	672	*61*	829	*52*
*East	129	*17*	331	*30*	593	*37*
North	37	*5*	100	*9*	116	*11*
*Mid	30	*4*	–	–	–	–
All	750		1103		1538	
Increase over last year			by 47%		by 39%	

*East and Mid Scotland were amalgamated in 1990 to form South-East Scotland

SWAP initially had a vocational thrust and offered chiefly science/technology courses. As the programme has developed, the range of subjects has diversified. Subjects now include: science; engineering; mathematics; technology; art and design; building; business studies; social sciences; health care; hospitality management; and divinity. There are also SWAP courses specifically aimed at getting people into advanced courses for a particular profession. These include access to primary education, access to secondary education and access to nursing. In addition to the access courses, SWAP offers pre-access programmes and preparation for access courses. Table 1.2 gives details.

Table 1.2: Numbers of students taking courses by subject areas
Note: Subject areas have been ordered according to percentages taking these subjects in 1991/92

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Science and Engineering	276	*37*	413	*38*	630	*40*
Combination of courses, eg arts and business studies	140	*19*	28	*3*	228	*14*
Access to Education	–	–	230	*21*	209	*13*
Nursing	1	*0.1*	129	*12*	190	*12*
Business or Administration	44	*6*	71	*7*	172	*11*
Arts	–	–	85	*8*	76	*5*
Social Subjects	95	*13*	109	*10*	51	*3*
Other	120	*16*	20	*2*	20	*1*
General	74	*10*	–	–	11	*1*

The usual duration of the courses is one year for full-time courses and two years part-time where it is available. SWAP courses tend to be modular, criterion referenced and use continuous assessment. If a student successfully completes a specified number of modules this is a pass and allows access into a higher education course. In fact, SWAP courses carry *a guarantee of an offer of a place in higher education*.

Trends in SWAP participation

As we have said, SWAP was set up to increase participation in higher education by adults over 21 without formal qualifications. In addition, a greater representation of certain groupings was to be sought. The groupings were: women, the unemployed, the economically and socially disadvantaged, the disabled, single parents and those from ethnic minorities. To collect statistics on all of these groups in SWAP would be difficult given the lack of suitable measures of some targets (eg social disadvantage) and the sensitivity of others (eg ethnic origin). Statistics from the SOED do, however, provide some information about SWAP students for the last three years. Research done within the West of Scotland consortium itself (Gallacher, Scott and White, 1992 unpublished) provides additional data, albeit from a sub-sample of the same students. The statistics show that there has been varied success in reaching target groups. Table 1.3 shows the age profile of SWAP students over the last three years.

Table 1.3: Ages of SWAP students at December of academic year

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
*16 or under	–	–	3	*0.3*	7	*0.4*
*17-18	4	*1*	24	*2*	37	*2*
*19-20	20	*3*	51	*5*	61	*4*
21-22	94	*13*	117	*11*	158	*10*
23-25	111	*16*	153	*14*	254	*16*
26-29	142	*20*	214	*20*	299	*19*
30 or over	345	*48*	511	*48*	772	*49*

*Students under 21 are likely to be taking a SWAP course as an in-fill

On the simple question of *age targets* a very small percentage of students in each year were under 21 (some 3% to 5%). Presumably they were students for whom SWAP was in some way an in-fill to another course. Most SWAP students met the over 21 criterion; in fact, just under half were over 30. We do not know the composition of the high percentage of students over 30. Previous research (ACACE, 1982; Munn and MacDonald, 1988; McGivney, 1990; Sargant, 1991) has suggested most adult returners to education are under 35. It is interesting, therefore, to note the attractions of SWAP for the over 30s.

As for formal qualifications, Table 1.4 figures show that adults with *no qualifications at all* made up a minor percentage of the SWAP intake, from 22% to 18% over the years. At the other extreme, a very small percentage of 6%-7% held what could be sufficient entry qualifications for higher education, more than two highers. For some SWAP students, these qualifications could probably be out of date. Other students with sufficient HE entry qualifications can choose to take an access course to build up their confidence or to develop the study habits necessary for HE.

Table 1.4: Qualifications of SWAP students prior to course entry

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	156	*22*	221	*20*	273	*18*
'O' grades	167	*23*	261	*24*	409	*26*
'O' grades plus other	122	*17*	155	*14*	286	*18*
1-2 Highers	104	*15*	153	*14*	196	*13*
1-2 Highers plus other	58	*8*	108	*10*	120	*8*
More than 2 Highers	32	*5*	51	*5*	76	*5*
More than 2 Highers plus other	8	*1*	24	*2*	26	*2*
Any other qualifications (eg City and Guilds, Nat Cert)	71	*10*	109	*10*	172	*11*

The bulk of SWAP students had some sort of formal certificate or award, not sufficient for entry to higher education but indicative of some past educational success. The students tended to have *no qualifications in English or maths;* about 4 in 10 students reported this. Given the central nature of these subjects to a broad

range of higher education courses, it could be argued that SWAP is indeed meeting the target of attracting students without formal qualifications. Gallacher, et al (1992) cast an interesting sidelight on this issue. They found that for their West of Scotland students (N = 459) 66% had left school at the minimum leaving age and overall only 19% had left with one or more Highers; however, 54% of the group had participated in education since leaving school. This suggests that SWAP may be targeting people already favourably disposed to the idea of gaining qualifications or participating in education, as might be expected. If that is the case, then the SWAP task is in terms of raising awareness of SWAP among this interested group, rather than persuading reluctant participants to come back to education.

If SWAP appears to be meeting its broad targets, is it also attracting under-represented groups? Table 1.5 shows that SWAP is attracting marginally *more women than men*; over the past three years, 53% of SWAP students were women.

Table 1.5: Sex distribution of SWAP students

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	358	*50*	472	*43*	754	*48*
Female	358	*50*	616	*57*	827	*52*

The *unemployed* are another target group; Table 1.6 shows that more employed people become SWAP students than do unemployed people, if full-time and part-time employment are counted together. If part-time employment is excluded, then the unemployed and employed are equal over the three years. The study by Gallacher *et al* (1992) showed that 64% of the West of Scotland students in their survey had given up a job to participate in SWAP; only 16% were unemployed before enrolling. In our own SOED/SWAP survey, about half of the sample of students had given up a full-time job which most had held for at least three years, to take up their studies. A similar percentage to the Gallacher *et al* figures had been unemployed. Does this imply that adults in employment see SWAP more positively? It may be that adults who are in employment have a more positive view of the job market and are willing to take the risk of leaving it. Although the majority of our sample had been attracted by a guaranteed place in HE, about two-thirds of them also gave job reasons as motivation for joining access courses. However, the most common of these was the non-specific 'change of career direction'. The students seemed to have an optimistic view of career possibilities at graduate level.

As there is no target figure for unemployed recruits to SWAP, then the participation rate of 36% for unemployed adults in 1991-1992 could be counted either as a success in increasing participation or as a failure in not increasing it further. In fact, over the three years of SWAP, participation by the unemployed varied, from 42% in 1989-90, to 30% in 1990-1991 to last year's 36% as Table 1.6 shows.

Table 1.6: Employment status of SWAP students prior to entry

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Full-time employment	238	*33*	425	*39*	515	*33*
Part-time	98	*14*	158	*15*	244	*16*
Other (eg unemployed or houseperson/carer)	298	*42*	321	*30*	565	*36*
Student	45	*6*	85	*8*	110	*7*
Combined status	8	*1*	8	*1*	20	*1*
Status not known	29	*4*	86	*8*	98	*6*

Economic and social disadvantage is generally assessed in terms of social class measures, which are in themselves open to criticism. An accurate assessment of economic/social disadvantage would involve collecting a wide range of information, a procedure both costly and technically difficult. The SOED statistics relied on a very broad indication of economic and social disadvantage. Students were allocated to one of two categories by reference to their post code. This process showed that for 1991-1992, 41% of the SWAP students came from an area designated as one of socio-economic disadvantage. This compares with 25% of such students in 1990-1991 and 49% in 1989-90. However, the recruitment of students who are economically and socially disadvantaged must also hinge on which courses are provided where; comparison of intakes across three separate years cannot be useful without this additional information. Nevertheless, this year's figures show a substantial percentage of people on access courses who are deemed in a very broad sense to come from an area of socio-economic disadvantage.

Gallacher *et al* looked at parental occupation — usually a measure for students still in school — and job status as measures in relation to socio/economic deprivation. They found that 64% of their students came from what could be called working class homes, while the majority were or had been in manual (54%) or in routine non-manual (28%) jobs. Again, we might say that with no targets established, these SWAP students could represent relative success or relative failure in hitting the target, especially as the socio/economic status of any SWAP student is difficult to quantify. However, given the social class distribution of young people entering higher education, which shows a predominance of those from upper and middle class households, these figures are encouraging.

The SOED figures show a small participation from *disabled* people over the three years; about 2% of the SWAP student population. Again, without information on provision within colleges for different disabilities it is difficult to judge this figure. *Single parents* and *ethnic minorities* are not tracked in the SOED figures. Both these issues are sensitive ones, although the Gallacher *et al* study succeeded in gathering information on ethnic origin. They claim that:

> Members of the ethnic communities are almost totally unrepresented on the Access courses (1% Black or Asian). This is clearly very different from the situation which exists on many Access courses in England.

The reasons for this apparent difference could be the relative numbers of potential ethnic minority SWAP students or relative lack of success in reaching ethnic groups or relative linguistic differences in the ethnic groups available for recruitment in Scotland and England.

Overall, SWAP seems to be attracting the core group, people over 21 without formal qualifications for HE. Some established SWAP courses are over-subscribed and this opens the possibility of selection of students to improve the participation of target groups. Admissions tutors may be as interested in students' ability to cope with the long haul of a degree course as in their social and ethnic origins. A study of admissions policy and practice would be worthwhile.

SWAP and entry to HE

The over-arching aim of SWAP is not participation in access courses, but participation as a stepping-stone to higher education. As might be expected, given SWAP's emphasis on preparation for higher education, most students intend to progress to HE from access courses. Figures are not yet available on this for 1991-1992, but figures for the past two years show that on average just over two-thirds of those who started out managed to complete the course and claimed the intention to go on to HE. About one person in five withdrew from their SWAP course before completion for a variety of reasons. A small percentage completed their course but were assessed as failed; probably because they did not attain the learning outcomes for all their modules. The remainder, about 67% of those who started out, claimed the intent to move onto higher education.

We have figures on the eventual destinations of those students, again supplied by the SOED Statistics Division, for the students who were on access courses in 1990/1991. Of the 1103 entrants to access courses, 780 (71%) successfully completed their courses and were eligible to progress to higher education; apparently 520 did so. This is a progression rate of 67% in terms of those eligible. Taking a broader view, and calculating progression rates from the original 1103 entry, we can see that 47% of those who had started out in access courses actually 'made it' into higher education. However, this figure is almost certainly an underestimate of the number of students progressing to higher education. At the time of writing data were incomplete and, for example, almost the entire cohort of 200 students intending to progress from access to teacher training courses had not been included. SOED (1991) report that for the year 1989-1990 74% of access students completed their courses successfully and 70% progressed to higher education.

Non-progression to higher education does not necessarily represent a failure for access courses. Some students may find participation in access courses has helped to clarify their goals and in itself has met their educational needs. Of course, if having successfully completed access, students decide at a later date to progress, they may do so within a specified timetable. For those students who did progress, degree level study was the dominant choice.

Table 1:7: Former SWAP students now in higher education, by institution type, 1990-1991

	N	%
University	161	31
Central Institution	152	29
Nursing College	118	23
FE college	72	13

A very small number had entered teacher training from Access

Access students are to be found at university and in central institutions and following advanced courses in further education colleges. Central institutions are now an historic concept, but at the time the students were making their choices these institutions were not universities. It would be interesting to know which students went to which kinds of institutions and whether direction and guidance from the access provider played a part. The data emerging from the study funded by the Leverhulme Trust appear to suggest a strong geographic bond between FE providers and their favoured HE institution. For access students who are mobile, it may be difficult to exercise the degree of choice they would like, especially if HE sets conditions of acceptance additional to completion of the access course as we discuss in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

On the whole, the figures suggest that access courses are opening up higher education to people who might not otherwise have had this opportunity. Whether these people are the target population(s) identified by SWAP is another question. The SWAP philosophy looks towards a widening of access to HE, bringing higher education within the grasp of under-represented groups. There are two important questions to ask about this ideal:

- will HE institutions try to emphasise potential academic success of incoming access students at the expense of targets?
- is it students from the target population(s) who find it particularly difficult to progress into HE?

The Leverhulme Trust study suggests that for some faculties in some institutions the 'social engineering' aspects of SWAP are peripheral. The very limited evidence on drop-outs suggests that the cumulative effect of several problems effects progression as much as coming from a target group (see Chapter 4). Underlying any final verdict on SWAP is of course the question of what counts as success anyway, and what level of wastage is regarded as bearable in the pioneering attempt to make higher education more accessible.

2 Research details

The broad aims of the research were:

- to investigate student perceptions of access courses as preparation for higher education
- to find out whether students encountered problems on access courses and in higher education and if so what these problems were.

These aims were pursued by a survey of access students on science, non-science and nursing access courses in 1991–92 and by a survey of former access students in their first year of higher education 1991–92 on similar courses. Students were surveyed twice, near the beginning and near the end of their courses, so that their initial impressions could be revised in the light of greater experience. Students were interviewed by telephone, using questionnaires developed from a separate, qualitative study of students' experiences, funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

The sample

Table 2.1 gives sample details:

Table 2.1: The sample

	Current Access				Access students in Year 1 of HE			
	Science	Non-science	Nursing	All	Science	Non-science	Nursing	All
Interview 1	60	54	39	153	28	37	34	99
Interview 2	52	45	34	131	21	30	25	76

Our initial aim was to draw up a sample of 120 students enrolled on access courses during 1991-92, 100 former access students in their first year of higher education and 50 students who had dropped out of their access course during 1991/92. This represented about a 10% sample of access students on the courses in which we were interested, a 20% sample of former access students in their first year of higher education and a 20% sample of withdrawals.

Since we wished to stratify the sample by subject studied, we increased the sample size a little so that we could examine the responses of particular groups of students. Sample profiles are contained in Appendix A2. The sample targets for access course students were met fairly easily. However, there was difficulty in achieving our target for science students in their first year of higher education, for reasons which are unclear. The greatest difficulty was in contacting drop-outs and we were able to interview only 11, when our target was 50. Despite the best efforts of SWAP co-ordinators, drop-outs remained elusive. Many had moved house and left no forwarding address while others may have been unwilling to be interviewed about their experience. Our sample of drop-outs is far too small to generalise from, but the information gained allows us to identify some areas for discussion and debate.

Inevitably we lost some students in the follow-up surveys, 22 from access courses and 23 from higher education - a wastage of 14% and 23% respectively. For nine of these students we were able to say that they had dropped out and to identify their reasons for doing so. The remainder proved impossible to contact but have not necessarily left their courses.

We stratified each of the three groups into science, non-science and nursing courses as this would allow us to see if there were substantial differences in perceptions about access as preparation for higher education among the different courses. Categorisation of courses was necessarily broad. Science included engineering, mathematics and computing courses. Non-science included social science, business and administration, and those doing combined studies such as arts and business studies. Our hypothesis was that students doing courses which depended on a hierarchy of knowledge, such as science courses, might identify different strengths and weaknesses of access courses from those students on social studies courses where knowledge is not necessarily hierarchical. In addition, a strongly vocational access course, such as nursing, might be expected to reveal fewer problems of match and mis-match than courses preparing students for general degrees. In the event, few clear differences among the students emerged.

Methods

The information was gathered using telephone interviews. The topics covered included:

- motivation
- views on modules
- views on teaching methods
- opinions on tutors' positive qualities
- assessment, especially continuous assessment
- study skills
- availability of guidance
- problems and guidance / support received
- background demographic information.

These topics were largely set in the context of students' perceptions on how well their access courses had prepared them for higher education. The first interview (in January/February 1992) covered most of the topics in depth. The second interview (in June 1992) briefly recapitulated preparation and problems from the perspective of the end of the academic year, and in addition asked about:

- intent to progress
- vocational plans (HE only).

Categories for closed questions were derived from the qualitative study funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The schedules were piloted in a small sample of access and of HE students whose course areas seemed peripheral to our sample (eg Built Environment).

The average length of time for the first survey interview was about 35 minutes. The follow-up interviews lasted approximately 10 minutes; the questions then

were more focused and aimed at updating the main points arising from the previous survey. In general, the interviews with access students who had proceeded to HE were slightly longer because they were asked additional questions comparing their access course to their current HE course. The respondents were in the main very happy to give their views, even although the first round interviews especially could be lengthy. The longest interview lasted for 1 hour 10 minutes.

Research claims

The sample size for access students and for those in their first year of higher education might seem to provide a fairly firm basis on which to generalise. However, the self-selected nature of the sample casts doubts as to its representativeness. It would be prudent to interpret this data as providing a snapshot of students' views and to test their reliability against FE and HE tutors' perceptions of their experience of teaching SWAP students. As in all surveys, people can only respond to the questions they are asked and inevitably we are left wanting to know more. As we shall see, the vast majority of the two cohorts of students were satisfied with their access courses, which they believed had prepared them well for higher education. Yet many in their first year of higher education were experiencing difficulties with the academic content of their courses. We know little about the nature and intensity of these difficulties and whether they inhibited progress into the second year of higher education. Perhaps the students expected difficulty as an inevitable part of learning in higher education and looked to themselves rather than their access courses as being at fault. It would be fascinating to compare the responses of access students, other adult students and younger students to questions about their experience of and preparation for higher education. Indeed findings from research done by Entwistle, Hounsel, Macaulay, Situanyake and Tait (1989) on students' learning in science and engineering courses can be inferred from student views of their experience in higher education. In particular, the importance placed by students on adequate subject knowledge prior to HE entry in Entwistle et al's study is perhaps echoed in some access students' perceptions of modules as not preparing them for learning in HE.

What emerges from the wealth of data from the surveys is a picture of dedicated students making financial and other sacrifices to participate in higher education, convinced of the social and economic benefits such participation will bring. Let us now look at their views in more detail.

3 A good preparation for higher education

Most SWAP courses are modular, criterion referenced and continuously assessed. Students typically have to complete between 20 and 22 modules, each being a unit of work of about 40 hours. Each module has learning outcomes specified and students are assessed in various ways to determine whether they have achieved the learning outcomes. It is important to be clear that learning outcomes are not graded; a student achieves them or not as the case may be and may make more than one attempt at demonstrating this achievement. Modules are graded at levels, the higher the level the more demanding the module. The modules and levels which go to make up the various access courses are negotiated by the further and higher education institutions involved and different course structures have emerged. For example, some courses adopt a core and options model, while others retain a broad core through the entire course and others again have a core plus particular combinations of modules for those wanting to specialise in particular branches of science, say.

Access courses are preparing students for higher education provision which is now quite diverse. Some higher education courses, particularly those at Higher National Certificate or Higher National Diploma level, are themselves modular and are organised along very similar principles to access courses. Some degree courses rely largely on continuous assessment with formal examinations playing a small part in assessing students' abilities. Other degree courses rely heavily on end of year examinations. Provision is diverse not only in terms of assessment but also in the kind of knowledge that is valued. Abstract, theoretical knowledge is the hallmark of some courses; applied, practical knowledge is the hallmark of others. Differences in provision are apparent at course and faculty level rather than at the level of the institution.

Access courses thus have a difficult job to do, preparing adult students for such a diverse higher education provision. Their starting point is that adults with few or no formal qualifications need something different from traditional, school-type learning and need their confidence boosted. A supportive environment and an incremental approach to learning are seen as preparing students for the demands of higher education. In higher education independent learning is emphasised and students must sink or swim by their own efforts. Tutors believed that access students' confidence in their own abilities was increased by small group teaching methods and high amounts of direct help and support from tutors. Students would then be better able to cope with potentially more uncongenial learning environments in higher education. Differences between access course and higher education environments worried tutors in each. Nevertheless, the survey samples felt well-prepared in general terms for higher education as Table 3.1 shows.

Table 3.1: Overall, how well prepared for higher education do you feel?

	Access students		Former Access students in first year of HE	
	March N = 153 %	June N = 131 %	March N = 99 %	June N = 76 %
Very well prepared	20	24	31	26
Quite well prepared	53	59	57	59
Not prepared at all	6	5	12	12
Uncertain/Not able to say	21	12	–	3

By the end of their access year, 83% of students felt either very well or quite well prepared for higher education. By the end of their first year in higher education, former access students felt similarly positive with 85% expressing satisfaction. These are gratifying figures for access tutors. The high level of satisfaction from students at the end of their first year in higher education must be particularly pleasing, based as they are on real experience of the demands of high level courses. This high level of satisfaction with access courses was borne out by other aspects of the survey. For instance, when asked in June, whether their access course had been worthwhile, 98% of students said 'yes' and 72% felt well informed about the opportunities now open to them. Indeed, 91% were intending to progress to higher education, with about a third intending to go to university, about a quarter each to central institutions and nursing colleges and the remainder to a variety of colleges. Table 3.2 shows the level of course to be studied.

Table 3.2: Course level intentions for access students (June 1992)

	N = 131 %
Degree	54
HND/HNC	14
Nursing Qual.	20
Other	2
Not sure of progress	5
Not going to HE	4

As might be expected, degree level courses were favoured with relatively few students opting for HND/HNC qualifications. Perhaps this is not surprising with SWAP's emphasis on higher education as a goal and popular perception of higher education as meaning degree level study. Only 4% of students were not going on to higher education and there were a mixture of personal and financial reasons for this; 5% were unsure, again largely for personal reasons. Given the educational aspirations of the students how does this general picture of satisfaction with access courses as preparation for higher education stand up to closer examination? Modules, assessment, teaching methods, tutor qualities and study skills were probed in some detail. Let us consider what the students had to say.

Modules

Over the two interviews, as higher education drew near, the access students were less convinced that modules gave a good preparation for HE; 17% felt negative in March, 32% in June. This means, of course, that the majority of students were still favourably disposed towards modules, (58% in June) while 10% were unsure. Nursing students were the least critical group with about one in four saying that modules were not a good preparation for higher education, compared to one in three in the science and non-science groups. Looking in more detail at responses the following aspects of modules were most criticised.

Table 3.3: Most frequently cited criticisms of modules by current access students

N = 153	Agree %	Disagree %	Not Sure %
Using modules you forget a lot of what you are taught	44	46	9
Modules do not allow you to obtain an overall view of a subject	43	48	9
Modular courses are better preparation for HE than taking Highers or 'A' levels	42	29	29
The material in modules is well presented	62	28	11
It's easy to see the connection between one module and another	68	23	9

Worries about remembering content, seeing the subject as a whole and making connections are worth highlighting since they are not inevitable features of a modular curriculum. Modules which deliberately set out to integrate previous work and assignments which required recapitulation and integration of old and new materials were early features of the modular system introduced into Scottish non-advanced further education in the 1980s. So too, was the teaching of two separate modules together as a kind of double module so that students could make connections.

The higher education students had more experience on which to base their views. On looking back from a whole year in HE, they too felt more negative by the second interview; 24% were negative in March, and this had risen to a worrying 43% by June. For this group only 49% were positive and 8% unsure. Again, nursing students were the most positive group. Science students had become the most critical with almost two-thirds of the 21 students interviewed perceiving modules as not a good preparation for higher education.

Those who were positive about modules invoked their confidence building and hence motivating consequences, as the following quotations from HE students show:

> [It was] confidence building, the way modules were carried through.
>
> The modular system covered subjects thoroughly, with assessments to identify strengths/ limitations; good preparation for [this] course as structure is similar.
>
> [The modular system] drives you to achieve — motivating.

Criticisms centred on the fragmented nature of learning as with access students. Furthermore, some students not on modular HE courses were critical of the lack of fit between modular access and non-modular HE. Some HE students were also concerned about the academic level of the subjects on their access course; 42% felt it had been too low, 47% felt it had been just right, and only 1% said it had been too high. Concern about academic level is also emerging from our analysis of qualitative data, with maths modules seeming to cause most anxiety. We understand that SWAP West is now reviewing the module and revised units will be in place for session 1992-1993.

Underpinning many of the criticisms of a modular approach were criticisms about assessment. The data were difficult to disentangle, perhaps reflecting students' ambivalence on the topic. They saw benefits in a step by step approach, in a gradual increase in difficulty and in opportunities to try, try and try again to achieve learning outcomes. This was personally rewarding and motivating. But was it good preparation for higher education?

Assessment

At the first interview, the current access students in the main disagreed (48%) or were not sure (26%) that assessment on access prepared them for assessment in HE. At the second interview, 70% of the students agreed that continuous assessment *had* prepared them for higher education. This apparently contradictory view may derive from what the students saw as the purposes of continuous assessment, which were to help and motivate the learner. Earlier in the access course, students may have identified assessment with exam practice or other similar preparation for higher education. By the end of the course, they may have appreciated that the access assessment approach had prepared them by giving them the confidence to face assessment in higher education. Continuous assessment built up students' confidence, made them want to learn, rewarded them for success; over 70% of the students agreed with these statements. On the other hand, the students already in higher education were much more aware of and worried by exams. At their first interview, almost two-thirds of this group (63%) felt that assessment on access had not prepared them for the kind of assessment they were meeting in higher education; just over three-quarters of them reported that their HE courses were more exam-based than access had been. At their second interview, the students as a group were apparently more optimistic: This time half of the group felt that access assessment had in fact prepared them for HE:

> Assessment on access was not **similar** [to HE] but built up confidence [and] therefore the ability to cope.
>
> It gave you confidence in small areas.
>
> It encouraged you to achieve.

The negative half of the group were in the main critical of the lack of exams or of exam practice on access. Only three people from this admittedly small sample (76 in all for round two of the HE interviews) were directly critical of continuous assessment.

Most of the HE students who found assessment methods similar on both access and HE were on the vocational nursing courses. These students were positive about their preparation in terms of assessment as were a minority of students from science and non-science courses. Numbers are small and the students were drawn from a diversity of courses and institutions.

Behind the issue of assessment methods as preparation for higher education there is the possibility of access assessment including some form of grading. This would be completely counter to present SWAP thinking but might find favour with some HE providers. Chapter 5 covers this topic more thoroughly; here we will conclude by noting that the assessment issue will not go away. Unless SWAP moves from the defensive to the proactive, the positive benefits of continuous assessment may be forgotten in the demand for norm-referenced assessment from HE providers and from students themselves. As one student complained:

> Continuous assessment isn't fair. Somebody who gives little/no work passes the same as somebody who works hard.

Teaching methods

The formal lecture was the most common teaching method experienced by the HE group (57% of the students). It was also the method judged least effective by 44% of them. Access students gave a wide range of teaching methods as most commonly used; almost a quarter of the group found it impossible to choose just one. The access students also disagreed over what was least effective. The largest single grouping was the 12% who felt that handouts were least effective for them. This may reflect the diversity of access as opposed to the limitations of HE, but the basic question is, could the access students cope with this change?

On looking back, just over two-thirds of the HE students felt that access methods were a good preparation for higher education:

> [There was a] smaller group on access but [teaching] methods [were] the same — expository. Note taking and exercises in the module [were] geared to gathering relevant information.
>
> The teaching methods on Access were similar to [the] present course, a mixture of everything.
>
> [There are] similar methods used to present course. Now classes are bigger, however.

Over half of the positive students made the point that methods then were similar to methods now. In real number terms, people who saw similarities between access methods and HE methods were few (only 26) and tended to come from science or nursing courses, courses where practical work was important. It is not

surprising that these students say access teaching methods is good preparation. It is more unexpected to find that the other students who felt positive about teaching methods *did not* remark on similarities. What was it about access methods which made them feel prepared for higher education? Again we might speculate that it was the confidence building qualities of access methods which enabled students to cope with the rather different approaches they found in higher education. They did note some differences, but these differences had been anticipated by some of the students, perhaps because access tutors:

> tried to help us and let us know what to expect.

A similar view of tutor input was expressed by a minority of the HE students in relation to the transition from a modular system into their current system, concerning the subjects taught. Being prepared for a greater level of difficulty had helped these former access students to come to terms with the demands of HE.

Those HE students (25%) who were negative about access teaching methods as preparation for HE were virtually unanimous in pointing out that methods were different:

> [You were] nursed through access [it's] totally different on this course, you're left to your own devices.

Again, the question is, will this difference in methods affect the students' ability to cope with HE? For any student, being left to your own devices can be demotivating. However, students had had experience of independent learning on access courses: 95% reported working on their own as a regular part of their access course. For some access students, accustomed to a high level of tutor input alongside independent learning, the teaching methods used in HE may open the door to feelings of alienation. Again, contrasts with younger students would be revealing. With resource constraints perhaps encouraging the use of lectures, sometimes using a video link to accommodate all the students, alienation might feature among students in general.

Qualities of tutors

For the access students, tutors were seen very positively. The tutors were knowledgeable, patient, enthusiastic — with one or two minor exceptions often given by name. Their only failing was in sometimes rushing through the material. For the HE students, their hindsight view of access tutors was very similar, except that on looking back, these students did not feel the tutors on access courses had rushed through the material. They did feel this about their current tutors in HE, who were slightly less often described as enthusiastic, or patient, or understanding adults' needs. For these former access students, the biggest gap was in the tutors' ability to communicate well; 76% saw this as a quality of access tutors, but only 44% saw this as a quality of HE tutors. This drop may reflect the lack of opportunity given to HE tutors, if teaching is largely by lecture. In comparison,

the access tutors taught small groups and were able to encourage more dialogue with students.

For the HE students looking back there was one other marked difference in tutor qualities; current higher education teachers were more often seen as 'helping students express their own views' (92%) than were access tutors (70%). This may be an optimistic rationale of being left to get on with it in higher education, but we did find several HE students who criticised access teaching methods as 'spoonfeeding'.

On the whole, both groups of students were very positive about the human face of teaching staff in FE and in higher education. The few highly criticised exceptions may have stood out particularly clearly against a generally admired background. If teaching methods are different, the qualities of teaching staff in HE may help students cope.

Study skills

Having study skills is integral to making progress in further or higher education. Only a minority of people in our two samples had no qualifications whatever (12% access, 15% HE). The majority had some formal qualification, although their study skills may have been forgotten or their confidence eroded prior to the access course. At the first interview, both access and HE students were positive about the study skills taught on access. At the second interview, as the academic year ended, an increased percentage of both groups felt negative (access — 18% increased to 31%; HE — 24% increased to 35%). Those who were positive about study skills were highly enthusiastic:

> Invaluable! Strategies, techniques in organising and preparing work to write essays. Knowledge of how to use resources gave an advantage over new young students coming straight from school.

Given the emphasis on exams elsewhere in the interviews, we expected the negative HE group to base their criticism of study skills on the lack of exam preparation in access. In fact, this group gave a range of individual criticisms. The largest common group of complaints focused on study skills as too little, too late and too patronising:

> [Access] didn't do much on study skills. There could have been more.
>
> It was taught as if we were 5 year olds!

No-one complained that study skills as taught on access had misled them or confused them or impeded their ability to cope with higher education, although some students felt that they were happier finding their own skills, their own optimum study plan. This may suggest that study skills should not be taught in a prescriptive way but rather presented as a menu with no one way being clearly the best for all students. Other studies have indicated that this is an area where

students welcome the opportunity to share experiences and views. Whether study skills should be taught as a free-standing module or integrated with subject teaching is a moot point. Entwistle et al, (1992) recommend separate workshops. They also suggest that in HE lecturers are experienced in teaching content rather than process and that study skills teaching needs to be part of staff development programmes in HE.

Students, on the other hand, often express a preference for study skills to be integrated into subject teaching where their relevance can often be more readily appreciated (Munn et al, 1992). Perhaps both approaches are required, the key element being high quality teaching of study skills. Lack of study skills did not seem to be a problem (or was not recognised as a problem) for our sample, although a lack of study skills may be behind some of the academic problems reported in the next chapter.

Possibilities of change

In this section we have looked closely at students' views of the major components of an access course, that is modules, assessment, teaching methods, the qualities of tutors, and study skills. The students were aware of major differences between access and HE but only a minority were troubled by these differences. There was no particular pattern in terms of subject area to the complaints about a mis-match between access and HE, but students in all three areas (science, non-science and nursing) felt that access had under emphasised the volume of work and the effort required in HE. On the whole, the students were highly positive about access, the majority of them feeling well-prepared for higher education although worried by exams or the prospect of exams. However, their preparation tended to be in relation to confidence and reassurance about their capacities as much as in respect of subject content. This was not necessarily seen as a criticism of access, but it does raise questions of how closely access courses may reasonably be expected to mirror specific higher education courses and yet still retain the vital element of confidence-building.

The overall numbers of former access students in HE are as yet very small and students from access now enrolled in Scottish HE institutions range from one student to a maximum of 58 in one of our larger universities. These numbers are too small to affect individual HE institutions, yet if access numbers keep increasing overall, as they have done (by 47% in 1990-91 and 39% in 1991-92) and if collaboration between HE and FE also grows, will access change? We would speculate that the two major areas for change would be assessment and the modular curriculum. Two kinds of change in assessment seem likely. First, some access courses may begin to offer students practice in traditional end of term examinations so that students likely to experience those kinds of examinations in HE can develop examination techniques. Secondly, there is a possibility that pressure to grade students' performance on access will increase, especially if funding policy leads to a contraction in the availability of HE places. HE institutions will be faced with increased competition for places and grading student applicants is one way of allocating them. As far as a modular curriculum is concerned, it is to be expected that content will change and develop given the innovative nature of the programme. SWAP has mechanisms to encourage curriculum review and this is to be welcomed.

4 Problems and coping

Both samples agreed that access was or had been a good preparation for higher education, with some reservations. This does not mean that all was sweetness and light. It would be a singularly fortunate and tough minded group of students who encountered no problems or difficulties during their studies. Indeed only one single student reported having had no problems at all during the academic year. In this chapter we look at the problems faced by the students. Were similar problems encountered by both groups? Did problems intensify as the students moved to HE or was it the students with fewer problems who had been able to progress? Coping with difficulties met is central to the retention of students within the system and to their successful progression towards completion. Both FE and HE institutions offer their students help and guidance; we also consider who helps the students and why some problems attract more help than others.

Students' problems

For both our samples, their chief problems were located in mo*ney* and in *time*. These are likely to be problems for all students, of course, but not all students start off by giving up a wage or by considering how best to fit in family demands with study. The demographic background of our samples suggests that for a substantial group, progression to higher education involved sacrifices:

- over a third had dependent children
- almost half had been in full-time paid employment before starting their studies
- most of those who had been employed had held their job for at least three years.

These bald figures suggest that the access students had made a serious commitment to education. As they moved into HE, this commitment was more severely tested. Table 4.1 shows a comparison of the two groups, in terms of problems reported by at least four in ten students in each sample.

Table 4.1: Problems reported by 40% and over of access and ex-access students in HE

Access students (N = 153)	%	Ex-Access students in HE (N = 99)	%
Inadequate grant	57	Inadequate grant	54
Forced to spend savings	49	Cost of course materials	52
Finding the time to study	42	Forced to spend savings	50
		Finding the time to study	50
		Being self-disciplined	49
		Difficulties in understanding the subject	43
		Inaccessible learning materials	41

As Table 4.1 shows, more of the HE students had more problems. Women were over-represented in the HE sample (70% female), which could affect the responses. Interestingly, however, the issues identified in Table 4.1 seem to be student problems rather than women-only problems. Key problems were finance, academic and organisational in terms of finding time to study. These are problems men report too (Munn et al, 1992).

Given the over-representation of women in the HE group, it is interesting that *childcare problems* were reported by similar percentages of access and of HE students (16% access, 19% HE). We had anticipated a greater incidence of childcare problems for the HE sample, with its higher female population, in the context of SWAP targeting single parents. Over half of those with childcare problems had received help at both access and HE institutions. It may be that this is an area where institutions are prepared and able to help their students cope. Alternatively, having small children may be such a fundamental barrier to participation that child care provision is under-represented as a problem.

Dealing with problems

Admitting to a problem does not mean that the student can get help or indeed wants help. For example, 49% of the HE students had problems with self-discipline, getting down to work, as did 37% of the access students. About a third of the access students had received help, largely from tutors. Only one in ten of the HE students with this problem had been given help. This is not necessarily a reflection on HE staff and their distance from students. The students themselves felt they had moved on from access:

> I have to learn to do it myself. I'm the only one who can help me get down to work.

In a sense, whether this view is true or not is immaterial. The student who expressed it had internalised the HE work ethic of doing it yourself. Other problems cited may have been problems for which the student neither received nor looked for help, because the difficulty was at a level with which the student could cope. The problems for which students were most likely to seek and to receive help were difficulties in understanding the subject and, what we have called 'admissible' personal problems such as those of childcare or illness. Problems concerning family or marital relationships or finance were areas where students tended not to seek help. Let us look at these areas more closely.

Academic problems

Table 4.1 shows that for the HE students, *difficulties in understanding the subject* had crept up to affecting 43% of the sample. Almost two-thirds of these people received help, largely from tutors. On access, a smaller percentage (30%) had found such difficulties and slightly over two-thirds of them had received help, again from tutors. Various other academic aspects (eg study skills, assessment, the way the student was being taught) had created problems for at least a quarter

of the HE students and varying percentages of the access students (from 16% to 31% according to the issue). In all these areas, over half or just under half the students at each level had received help. The availability of HE tutors in offering help seems as great as that of their FE colleagues teaching access courses. We should add that the extent and quality of help was not explored, but it was available in both FE and HE for academic problems. Our findings on academic problems are echoed elsewhere. For example, a small scale comparative survey of former access students and of non-access students in their first year of HE, within one university, found that access students were more likely to report the volume of work as problematic and to find some difficulty with all aspects of study (Mordaunt, 1991).

Personal problems

The area of personal problems attracted a similar response. More 'public' or 'admissible' problems received as much or more help even than academic problems. For example, we have already noted that over half of those with childcare problems had been helped, in access and in HE. Similarly, the minority who reported problems of illness (11% on access, 18% on HE) also reported a high level of response to their problems; about two-thirds (in access) or more (in HE) were given help. The help may have been of a fairly low-level kind such as accepting an assignment after its due date, or it may have been more extensive, involving extra tuition, for example.

However, the more personal or private the problem, the less likely the students were to get help with it. A minority of people had (or a minority chose to report) what we might call 'private' personal problems, that is problems with family relationships or lack of support from friends. Help given here was less frequent and more often from within the family/friendship circle. The impact of this was more evident later, at the second, briefer interview as we shall see in the next section.

Financial problems

The third and most common source area of problems is finance. Money difficulties of various kinds surface in Table 4.1, especially for the HE students. These ranged from grants being seen as inadequate to problems with the costs of course materials. Only about a third or just under a third of those students with money-driven problems received help. When it came to avoiding spending their savings, or at least spending them as wisely as possible, only 6% of the 50% or so in each sample who had done this had received any help.

Looking back on access from HE, the ex-access students were more convinced of financial guidance in access; 84% thought that access had provided this, while 33% were aware of it in HE. For the current access group, 72% were aware of financial guidance. Perhaps the guidance on offer cannot help students to change what one person described as 'a life of poverty'; nevertheless, there is guidance available, at access level particularly. Is there scope for HE providers to offer a more pro active approach to financial guidance, offering students advice on budgeting and other matters such as debt management? Work in progress suggests that current access students expect HE to be a similar financial burden

to their access courses, when in fact it will be heavier. Previous research has indicated that financial management can be a problem for younger students too. While some students will need personalised and private advice, a general introduction to financial management might be offered in institutions' induction programmes with refresher courses also on offer from time to time.

The effects of problems

At the second interview, the students were simply asked whether they had had academic or personal or financial problems. If they had had any problems, they were then asked if this had affected their work. Table 4.2 sets out their responses.

Table 4.2: Problems and whether they affected students' work

Access students (N = 131)			Ex-access students in HE (N = 76)		
	%	% of that group affected		%	% of that group affected
Academic problems	28	46	Academic problems	32	72
Personal problems	29	70	Personal problems	33	76
Financial problems	58	49	Financial problems	55	36

Table 4.2 shows some rather unexpected responses from the students. For example, we might expect academic problems to affect work performance, unless the students had been given help. The level of help given appeared to be about the same for both access and HE students, yet almost three-quarters of the HE students with academic problems felt that their work had been adversely affected. We might speculate that help had been given too late, or that these particular students had not sought help, or that they were students who might continue having difficulties. Previous work suggests that where HE courses rely on end of term assessments, students experiencing academic problems can be less quickly identified; by the time such problems have been identified they have become more serious (Munn et al, 1992). Perhaps the greater frequency of assessment and the closer contact between staff and students on access courses allows tutors rapidly to identify students experiencing academic problems. In any case, unsurprisingly, academic difficulties in HE seemed to have more effect on the students' work.

On the other hand, the financial problems experienced by over half of each sample were less likely to affect work, perhaps because about half of each sample did have savings to spend or perhaps because their financial sacrifices were offset against future gains. Overall, the money problem, though pervasive, was a problem which the majority of students felt able to cope with in terms of affecting their work even though 41% of HE students had to find part-time work to ease financial difficulties.

A more serious effect was exercised by personal problems. Of the third or so students who had had a personal problem, about three-quarters reported that this had adversely affected their work. This rather contradicts the earlier impression of personal problems as somehow less threatening because they were

less pervasive than financial problems. Even with high levels of help given, for example in terms of childcare or in relation to illness, personal problems were seen as strongly affecting work performance. This may be the case for students in general, although the problems themselves must vary. For the access and HE students in our sample, personal problems may be compounded by feelings of guilt. From other work with adult returners, we have found that these students accuse themselves of selfishness, feel guilty about spending less time with their partner or children and in some cases try to disguise or minimise the pleasure they feel in their intellectual efforts (Blair et al, in press). Although we did not ask our samples why their personal problems so frequently affected their work, we might suggest that guilt plays a part. Whether it would be enough to make some students drop out is another question.

We suggest in Chapter 5 that it can be accumulated problems as much as one pressing problem which leads students to abandon their course. For example, our on-going Leverhulme study of SWAP students indicated that adults were more likely to experience difficulties in coping with their course if they experienced a combination of problems; academic, personal and financial. This survey has found that all of the students (save one) reported some sort of problem, but that few gave combinations of problems across the different possible areas. With the small numbers involved, it is difficult to say whether particular combinations were more problematic than others, but there was some indication that combinations which included illness or problems with family relationships were more likely to be seen as causing difficulties in coping with a course. We might also suggest that for some students it could be easier to admit to some difficulties rather than others, financial rather than personal or academic for instance. It may also be easier to rationalise reasons for leaving the course (ie can't afford it) than to admit to being unable to cope with personal problems. If these rationalised reasons are recorded, then underlying reasons may not be tackled by guidance providers. One positive factor which emerges from other work is the efficiency of peer support groups as a bulwark against family pressures or a student's loss of confidence. This may be an area to be encouraged by guidance staff or student services in HE.

Guidance

Before leaving this chapter it is worth drawing attention to students' perceptions of the availability of guidance services in access courses and in higher education institutions. Academic tutors often are students' first source of help for academic problems and sometimes for financial and personal problems too. Guidance and welfare services provide more specialised help and so it is important to know how students perceived these services. Students were asked about the availability of a range of student support services. How knowledgeable were they about provision?

In brief, students seemed well acquainted with a range of guidance services on access courses even if they did not use them Provision cited by 80% or more of current or past access students included tutors to help with academic problems, specialised advice on personal or financial problems and careers advice. Knowledge of provision in higher education was much poorer as Table 4.3 shows.

Table 4.3: Higher education ex-access students' knowledge of guidance provision

N = 99	Past provision on access course %	Current provision in HE %
One-to-one meetings with a tutor or adviser about academic progress	95	59
One-to-one meetings with a tutor or adviser about personal problems	92	68
Financial advice from a tutor or other adviser	84	33
Careers advisory service	88	18
Personal and social development classes	76	32
Student self-help groups	73	35

Students were asked whether the above guidance services were available to them and we stressed our interest in availability rather than in whether they had used any of the services. The students were drawn from a variety of access courses and from a variety of higher education institutions. and so it is the general picture which is interesting. Their lack of knowledge of guidance provision in higher education is striking, perhaps reflecting poor advertising of services or perhaps reflecting student belief that in HE you sank or swam by your own efforts. It came as a surprise that so few students know of the careers advisory service in higher education. It is true that they were in their first year and graduation was some way off. On the other hand, having in many cases given up employment to return to education, students might have been expected to be especially interested in and alert to labour market opportunities.

Conclusion

Although this chapter has concentrated on students' problems, it is important to remember that the vast majority of students felt that they were coping. In both March and June over 90% of those in higher education reported that they were managing or even managing well; 90% intended to progress to year two. A similarly high percentage of students on access courses claimed to be coping too. Academic, personal and financial problems were perhaps seen as part of student life. In any event, most adult returners are highly motivated and committed to their courses. Having made the decision to return and begun their courses they seem determined to stay, particularly if they have received sensitive guidance about what and where to study. For some students, however, making the transition from access courses to higher education became more complex than originally envisaged. We turn to this in the concluding chapter.

5 Making the transition to higher education

On looking back, the HE students felt that access had prepared them for higher education, that they were coping and that they were ready to go on. The access students too felt prepared, and had coped with access. At the first interview almost all the access students were planning to go on to HE. At the second interview in June this had dropped only from 94% to 91% who were intending to progress. Statistics made available by the SOED Statistics Division showed that only 67% of the students completing their course in 1990/91, and intending to go on, finally made it into HE. If we accept this figure as broadly accurate, the implication is that of the 119 students who said they intended to go on to higher education, only 80 will get there. By looking at reasons for leaving access, we hoped to gain some information about likely barriers to progression.

Discontinuing access

Our very small sample of 11 access students who had left before January 1992 were similar in demographic pattern to the main sample; they did not come from a particular group of any kind. Only one of the discontinuing group was exceptional, having dropped out because the college of his choice could not provide specialist equipment to help with his sight disability. This was ironic, given that SWAP is targeting disabled people, but bears out the point made earlier that setting up such a target should take into account the provision of facilities. The remaining ten students reported on reasons for leaving access (in order of frequency):

- financial problems, 'my bursary wasn't enough to live on'
- academic problems, 'I felt the course was too intensive and demanding'
- personal problems, eg illness, pregnancy.

Financial problems were the most pervasive and the most often given as the main reason for leaving the course, but all of these students had several problems to contend with. All mentioned problems falling into at least two of the three areas above and some mentioned problems in all three. We speculated whether it had been the accumulation of problems rather than any particular one which had discouraged them. Sensitive, in-depth interviewing is needed to explore reasons for leaving but problems in contacting the students makes research in this area difficult. Work undertaken by Cullen (1992) echoes our findings. This research for Edinburgh University had difficulties in reaching students who had discontinued the University's access course; 36 people were contacted and 14 eventually gave detailed information. All had left the course for complex reasons, furthermore, as the author suggested:

> Often the reason given at the time was only either the last straw or the least threatening reason to reveal.

As a footnote to this, we could add that we found a further five withdrawals from access on the second round of interviews. The four who gave reasons reported ill-health, or finance or personal problems. In addition, we found two dropouts from HE in our second round of interviews. One had had to leave to take a job, the other had been 'disappointed' by the HE course. Each of these people also mentioned other problems.

Information from the discontinuing access students supports the idea that those with several problems found it difficult to see the way ahead. In the main access sample, there were people with several problems in different combinations. However, almost all of these people claimed to be coping with the course. Whether this feeling will last until the new academic year starts is a moot point. Judging by other work in progress with access students some at least will have second thoughts about being able to cope with the long haul of a degree course. Some, of course, may be disappointed in the offer(s) they received from HE institutions and others may return to FE to take a different kind of course. We can only speculate about these options, but we do know what the access students hoped for.

A guaranteed place

Leaving aside the nursing students, whose HE track is different, we found that most of the science/non-science students wanted to take a degree course. A minority had set their sights at an HND. About half hoped to go on to a university; the remaining half split, with a majority choosing a CI and the minority an FE college. At their first interview, over three-quarters of the access students had given gua*ranteed entry to HE* as their motivation for taking the course. At the second interview, most were taking up this offer.

In fact, the SWAP advertising states that 'most SWAP courses' offer a guaranteed place in HE. This is legitimately interpreted by the HE providers as the guarantee of a conditional offer. At the second interview, 58% of the access students had had one conditional offer. A further 30% had had more than one offer. Most of those who had applied to several institutions had done so within a fairly limited geographical locality. Very few had applied to places all over Scotland, and the one person who gave detailed information on this had been very disappointed at the conditions set by a university outside her own consortium area (see below). Perhaps this was a unique example, but it does raise a question about how portable an access qualification may be, despite intentions that students should be able to move among consortia.

Conditions of entry to HE

For most of our sample, the only condition set by the HE institution was to complete the access course. A minority of people had to complete access *and* achieve certain grades (eg B, B, C); this condition was set by universities and by other HE institutions. SWAP philosophy does not encourage grading, but in some cases FE and HE have come to an agreement on this, a spin-off perhaps of the FE/HE collaboration encouraged by SWAP. A few people had to supply a

reference, and five people had been asked to attend the same university summer school. The latter condition was retailed to us with some bitterness by the student referred to earlier, who could only take the course she wanted at either of two universities. One had set the summer school condition, which implied eight weeks at a cost of £400, according to the student. This student could not fulfil the condition and may end up by not taking a university place at all, as may other students who fail to get the desired grades. Nevertheless, for the majority, the only condition was to complete the access course which they had virtually done at the time of the second interview. The decision not to go on will come from the student him or herself, who, on weighing up the situation, may decide that the potential gain requires too much of a struggle. Perhaps the opportunities provided by HND/HNC ought to be more fully highlighted. These courses provide a higher level qualification in their own right and can be a stepping stone to a degree, often guaranteeing entry to years two or three of degree level work. Decisions on whether or not to progress may be based also on the student's perception of his/her future.

Future plans

Taking out the nursing students, we looked at the future plans of the science/non-science students in HE. Under half of them had formulated any plan; most were uncertain of what they intended to do after completing their degree. This makes their ignorance of the existence of a careers service in HE all the more alarming. Of those people who did have plans, most thought it would be difficult to find the jobs they would like. Even the nursing students were not all inclined to see a future job as guaranteed.

The access students were very positive about the benefits of access; almost all of them thought the access course had been worthwhile:

> An excellent safety-net for those who need a second chance at education.
>
> I had enough Highers to go straight into HE but access was a 'warm-up'.
>
> Back into the swing of learning — and a guaranteed place.

Access courses in themselves were generally seen as interesting, and access was viewed as an excellent way of getting the brain back into shape or of gaining the confidence to use your mind. However, the guarantee of a place in HE was the major attraction of an access course:

> I would have had to do Highers otherwise, so this was a short cut.
>
> At first I wanted to go back and do Highers, but access was quicker and guaranteed a place at university.

SWAP was originally conceived as a facilitator of vocational study. The HE students in the sample had given up jobs to take up their studies but they had at

best only vague job aspirations for their future careers. On the other hand, they felt that their entry into higher education had been worth the sacrifices made:

> It gives you confidence — you are not stupid after all.
>
> Education opens up new fields of interest, gives you new insights.
>
> It will give me increased knowledge and (I hope) more money!

The access students now in their first year of HE had hopes rather than plans for their future. Some were on vocational courses; but others were taking more general degrees. Perhaps they were similar to other undergraduates in their focus on the current work rather than on the future, but they had made sacrifices to study. Will their work and effort bring the rewards they hope for in employment terms? Employment opportunities two or three years hence are clearly a matter of speculation. However, we do know that those with qualifications are more likely to obtain employment than those without. Enhanced employment opportunities are not the only potential gain from education. We have few doubts that most adults will gain enormous personal and intellectual satisfaction from their return to study. A whole host of research on adult education reports such features as the main gains from participation. This dimension of the purposes of education has often been neglected in recent years and vocational gains highlighted in their stead. It is important to remember, that valuable as economic gains are, personal and social gains are worthwhile too.

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Appendix 1: Drawing up the sample

The research design was based on existing SOED data on SWAP students. These data are discussed more fully in Chapter 1. Our initial aim was to draw up a sample of 120 adults enrolled on access courses during 1991/92, 100 access students who had progressed into HE and 50 students who had left their access course before it finished. This represented about 10% of the total of access students on appropriate courses, 20% of access students now in their first year of HE and about 20% of withdrawals. The latter percentage is an approximation based on the 1990/91 figures as 1991/92 figures were not available. We stratified each of the three groups into science, non-science and nursing courses as this would allow us to see if problems experienced and good practice varied with type of course. The definition of non-science used in this project was quite broad. Our original intent had been to look at science and social science courses in order to replicate the stratification in the Leverhulme/SCRE work, but there were far fewer SWAP social science courses than science ones at the time this survey was conducted. There were 10 social science or social science/arts courses and 30 science or science/engineering/technology courses. There was also a high percentage of SWAP students on purely vocational courses, 25% in all. Although the early figures we had access to were incomplete, we decided that:

- social science would have to be broadened to include a range of non-science courses
- one vocational course would have to be included.

The non-science group, therefore, included people on social science courses, business management courses and on hospitality and tourism courses. The inclusion of nursing access courses and their destination HE courses was felt to be particularly necessary; piloting had revealed informative differences in these courses.

Contacting the samples was to prove difficult, as the Data Protection Act inhibited us from using the SOED records to directly correspond with the students. Instead, generalised letters and reply forms were sent via the SOED to all FE colleges and HE institutions. The SWAP co-ordinators then distributed these to the appropriate students. If the student was willing to take part in the research he/she returned the form to SCRE.

In order to obtain a better representation of the relative numbers of students taking the different SWAP courses each of the samples was devised on a 6:5:4 ratio of science: non-science: nursing students. The ratio should strictly have been 6:5:2, but this would have given us only a small number of nursing students. Since we hoped to look at the nursing students' views separately, we decided to increase the representation for this group. The use of the 6:5:4 ratio led us to increase the sample of current access students from 120 to 150 and the sample of

access students now in HE from 100 to 113.

The sample targets for current access students were met fairly easily. We had 109 responses not used, plus 66 from nursing students. There was some difficulty in obtaining the required numbers for post access students and drop-outs. For the HE sample we only had 19 responses not used, plus 27 from nursing students. We received 35 replies from drop-outs, of whom only 11 could be contacted. Nine of these 11 agreed to be interviewed.

	Science	Non-science	Nursing
Current access students			
Intended sample (150)	60	50	40
First survey (153)	60	54	39
Second survey (131)	52	45	34
1st year HE students/post access			
Intended sample (113)	45	38	30
First survey (99)	28	37	34
Second survey (76)	21	30	25
Drop-outs from Access			
Intended sample (50)	20	17	13
First survey (11)	7	3	1
Second survey — access (5)	2	2	1
Second survey — HE (2)	–	1	1

Table A1: Intended and achieved sample

The exact reason for the shortfall in our first year HE science sample is unclear. The rate at which reply forms from these courses were returned to us was slower than for the other student groups. This was also a group which returned refusals. We found that, in some cases, the SWAP co-ordinators in HE institutions found it difficult to identify post access students, and were therefore unable to pass on our reply forms to them. There was concern from some co-ordinators about 'labelling' students in HE who came from an access course. It was felt that these students preferred to be seen as, and treated just like, the other entrants to HE. This attitude on the part of HE staff may have impeded setting up a system which monitored students from access courses and how they coped in HE. Whatever the reason, there was no systematic way of tracing those post access students who had gone on to certain HE courses.

The low numbers of drop-outs who responded is perhaps not surprising given the difficulties researchers and providers often encounter in attempting to follow up people who have left courses prematurely. Tracking adults in their progression through learning routes is beset with practical difficulties such as inadequate information systems, administrative pressures, and high staff workloads; finding those who have left the system is even more difficult. The numbers we obtained are too low to generalise from, but the information

gathered does allow us to raise areas for discussion and debate.

The loss of 22 students from the access sample and 23 from the HE sample by the time of the second survey represents a wastage of 14% and 23% respectively. For a very few of these students (N = 7) we were able to say that they had dropped out, and why. The remainder proved impossible to contact but this does not necessarily mean that they have left their courses.

A copy of all four interview schedules, with major frequencies inserted, is available from SCRE on request for a small charge.

Appendix 2: The sample profile

	Access Course (N = 153)	HE (N = 99)
Subject areas		
01 — science	39%	28%
02 — non-science	35%	37%
03 — nursing	25%	34%
Age		
under 20	12%	–
20-25	25%	29%
26-30	16%	17%
30-39	32%	30%
40-49	14%	20%
50-59	4%	3%
60 or over	0%	0%
Qualifications		
None	12%	15%
1-4 'O' grades	28%	22%
5 or more 'O' grades	16%	11%
Highers	23%	39%
Other	21%	13%
Science/Maths qualification	48%	58% *
Sex		
Male	51%	30%
Female	49%	70%
Employment status (before beginning access course)		
Full time employment	50%	55%
Part-time employment	12%	16%
Unemployed	18%	11%
Houseperson	11%	9%
Student	9%	8%

* (does not include access qualification)

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